

## Fact Sheet

# Anxiety in Children

### What is anxiety?

As parents, it is normal to want your children to feel safe and secure. When children become overwhelmed by fear or worry, it can be difficult to understand what is happening and how to help. Anxiety is more than just feeling nervous or worried; it's a normal part of the human response to perceived danger or stress. However, for some children, anxiety can become overwhelming, persistent, and appear even when there is no actual threat.

### It can look like:

1

#### Thoughts

Constant worry, fear something bad will happen.

2

#### Body

Tummy aches, racing heart, sweaty hands.

3

#### Behaviours

Avoiding things that cause fear, asking for reassurance again and again.

It is important for children and adults to know that anxiety, worry and dread are all normal feelings – but sometimes, those feelings need more attention.

## How to recognise anxiety in your child

Children and adolescents don't always have the words to say, "I feel anxious". Instead, anxiety often shows up in unexpected ways, and often look like something else: tantrums, refusal or acting out.



### Emotional clues – these are feelings your child might express out loud or keep hidden:

- Constant worry or fear even without an obvious cause.
- "What if" questions: "what if I get hurt?" "What if you don't come back?"
- Difficulty calming down after getting upset.
- Feeling overwhelmed by decisions or new situations.
- Often asking for reassurance.
- Avoiding eye contact when anxious or withdrawing socially.



### Behavioural clues – anxiety doesn't always look like fear. It often shows up in how your child behaves:

- Avoidance behaviours.
  - Refusing to go to school, birthday parties or out of school activities.
  - Avoiding homework or tests (especially if they feel the pressure to be perfect).
  - Avoiding new activities or speaking publicly.
- Repetitive behaviours.
  - Asking the same questions repeatedly.
  - Rigid routines or insistence on doing things "right".
- Irritability or strong emotional reactions.
  - Getting frustrated easily or angry over small things.
  - Sudden crying or shutting down.
- Clinginess or dependence that feels not developmentally right.



### Physical clues – anxiety lives in the body and children often feel it before they can understand it:

- Frequent stomach-aches or headaches (especially before school or events).
- Nausea, dizziness or "butterflies" in the stomach.
- Racing heart, sweaty palms, shaking hands.
- Sleeping difficulties – troubles falling asleep, restless sleep, frequent nightmares.
- Restlessness, trouble sitting still or fidgeting.
- Fatigue or exhaustion.



### At school – some children have the ability to hold things together during the day and fall apart at home, however, others show their anxiety in the classroom:

- Trouble focusing or completing tasks.
- Frequent visits to the school nurse.
- Refusal to go to school or participate in class.
- Underperforming despite abilities.
- Avoiding presentations or group work.

### What's 'normal' vs what's concerning?

It is completely normal for children to experience some level of fear, shyness, or worry, especially in new or challenging situations. However, when anxiety becomes persistent and disrupts their daily life, it may be time to consider seeking professional help. Below is a comparison of typical worries versus more concerning signs of anxiety:

"Typical" worries	Concerning worries
Nervous before a test, big game or a presentation.	Ongoing fear of performance situations that lead to avoidance or meltdowns.
Shyness around new people.	Intense fear of social interactions or speaking, even with familiar people.
Occasional nightmares or trouble sleeping.	Frequent sleep disturbances, bedtime panic, refusal to sleep alone beyond age norms.
Worry about a sick family member.	Constant fear that something bad will happen regardless of reassurance.
Wanting reassurance before trying something new.	Needing constant reassurance even about things that haven't changed.
Clinginess during transitions (for example starting primary school).	Extreme separation distress that lasts for months and interferes with daily life.
Preferring stable routine and predictability.	Meltdowns, distress or refusal to participate when routines are disrupted.
Temporary tummy aches before stressful events.	Frequent physical complaints (headaches, stomach-aches).
Frustration over tough assessments.	Complete shutdown, refusal or panic when facing any challenge or uncertainty.

'Typical' worries are usually short-term, situational, and tend to improve with time, experience and emotional development. They also do not interfere too much with daily life, and children will respond well to comfort from a supportive adult and being redirected. Signs of anxiety, on the other hand, are long-lasting, often get worse over time, and may manifest in various areas of the child's life. They are also disruptive to a range of areas of the child's life including school, sleep, and relationships, and cause a significant level of distress.

## How can I support my child with anxiety?

As a parent, your role is crucial in helping your child cope with anxiety. While you can't simply "take away" their anxiety, you can help them build emotional safety, coping skills, and confidence. Here's how you can help:



### **Validate their feelings:**

Acknowledge that anxiety is real, and it's okay for your child to feel the way they do. Reinforce that it's a normal part of life but that you're here to help them manage it.



### **Teach them about anxiety:**

Help your child understand what anxiety is and that everyone experiences it from time to time. This can reduce shame or confusion around their feelings.



### **Practice calming techniques together:**

Try deep breathing, mindfulness, or relaxation exercises to help your child manage their anxiety.



### **Create a safe environment:**

Ensure your child feels supported and be consistent in reassuring them that they're safe.



### **Help your child face their fears gradually:**

Encourage them to take small steps toward facing the things that cause anxiety. Start with less intimidating situations and build confidence over time.

## When to get extra support for your child

It may be time to seek extra help if:

- Anxiety is interfering with school, sleep, friendships or daily life.
- Your child is often overwhelmed or unable to calm down.
- You're feeling stuck or unsure how to help.

If you're concerned about your child's anxiety, it's helpful to start by reaching out to their paediatrician, your family GP, or the school counsellor or psychologist. These professionals can provide guidance, offer resources, and help determine if further support is needed to address your child's anxiety.

### Final word for parents

It's important to remember that you won't always have all the answers. Just being there for your child, offering your calm presence, and showing your willingness to support them can make a significant difference. With the right support, your child can learn to manage anxiety and feel more confident in handling life's challenges.